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## A STUDY OF NEW TESTAMENT PRECEDENT. III.

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A well-known college president was wont to speak of the need of a book of Christian casuistry which should treat of the numerous cases of conscience constantly arising amongst thoughtful people. The need of guidance in practical questions upon which the Scriptures either do not pronounce or may even seem to antagonize modern moral sentiment is undeniable. Yet the feeling among Protestants that an attempt to render decisions ready-made covering the entire field of morals would be fruitless and unwise will doubtless account for the failure of such a book to get itself written. For one thing the vast and constantly augmenting number of such questions precludes completeness in such a discussion, and for another the constantly varying relations of certain questions to individuals and circumstances precludes a proper judgment *a priori* upon them, with the harmful result in either case, of assigning a false, or confused ethical value to questions which might not be mentioned in the treatise, or which might subsequently arise, or which are of varying ethical value under varying circumstances. Better than an attempt to render ready-made decisions upon such questions would seem to be the suggesting of *data and a method* for their settlement by each thoughtful Christian for himself in a way at once Scriptural and scientific, namely, on the basis of permanent principles. It has been the purpose of the preceding articles to present certain data for use in the application of New Testament precedent to these questions amongst others. It remains in this concluding article to formulate and reënforce the conclusions reached and to indicate more precisely the method to be used in the application of New Testament example.

A *résumé* in outline of the previous discussion will aid us at this point:

1. *The need of the discussion.* Inferred
  - 1) From its relation to the problems of practical Christianity, e. g., Slavery, Intemperance, Amusements, Divorce, Missions, Sunday-schools, Woman's Sphere, etc.
  - 2) From the lack of formulated laws for determining the force of New Testament Precedent.
  - 3) From the diverse tendencies:
    - a. to the *neglect* of New Testament Precedent.
      - a) through individualism,
      - (a) rationalistic (b) mystical,
      - (b) through ecclesiasticism.
    - b. to the *abuse* of New Testament Precedent,
      - a) through an indiscriminating literalism,
      - b) through improper application of Precedent,
      - c) through opposition to religious progress.
2. *A helpful analogy.*  
 The dictum "New Testament precedent is the common law of the church."  
 Constitution, statute, and common law compared with New Testament principle, precept, and precedent.
  - 1) The authority of precedent greatest where explicit legislation is lacking.
  - 2) Precedent ultimately dependent on principle.
  - 3) Precedent illustrative of principle.
  - 4) Precedent valuable as raw material for the deduction of principles.
3. *Certain limitations upon the literal application of New Testament example.*
  - 1) *Temporal.* Changed conditions in the lapse of eighteen centuries.
  - 2) *Local.* Diverse conditions of life, e. g., in Palestine and in Massachusetts.
  - 3) *Ethic.* Difference between oriental and occidental character.
  - 4) *Personal.* Elements of action peculiar to the actor.
  - 5) *Spiritual.* Altered spiritual conditions, especially in the decrease of miracle, manifested even in the New Testament record.

Our discussion may continue with

4. *Data summarized and a method deduced.*

A series of postulates will perhaps best present our results:  
*Postulate 1. The accredited action of the New Testament is presumptively a precedent for all time.*

The burden of proof lies upon us for the vindication of any departure from the New Testament model. Yet the customary identification of thorough-going obedience to New Testament teaching with a rigid literalism has led Christendom at large either to the open denial or to the practical ignoring of this demand.\* The original presumption in favor of the Scriptural action clearly exists although the reasons for setting it aside may in many instances be so manifest as to need no formal statement. The proper alternative to liberalism is not the neglect of New testament precedent but the adoption of a proper method of applying it.

The presumption of our postulate has *a priori*, Scriptural, and historical arguments in its favor. *A priori* it would seem that a record so complete of the working out of the principles of Christianity under conditions so varied, a deliverance so fresh from the fountain-head and so far removed from all modern or personal bias must constitute the perpetual guide to Christian faith and conduct. And the Scriptures support the presumption.

1) *In the fact that special supernatural guidance marked the establishment of the Christian Church.* John 14:26; Acts 1:2, 8; Acts 2, and some fifty instances of supernatural guidance related in the Acts.

2. *In the fact that the authority of example as well as that of direct teaching is clearly recognized.*

a. Paul asserts precedential authority for his action. Phil. 4:9. "The things which ye both learned and received and heard and saw in me, these things do." Also Acts 20:35, R. V. 1 Cor. 4:19, 17†; 1 Cor. 11:1†; 2 Thess. 3:7-10†; Phil. 3:17.\*

\* Cf. Luther's lapse from his early position (about 1523) "Whatever is without the Word of God is by that very fact against " God to that of his constructive ecclesiastical period: "What is not against Scripture is for Scripture and Scripture for it."

† Note that the words "follow," "followers" in the authorized version are more accurately rendered "imitate," "imitators" in the R. V.; Gr. *mimēmai*, *mimētēs*

b. Precedential authority is asserted of the action of the New Testament churches. 1 Cor. 11:33;" "As in all the churches of the saints." Also 1 Cor. 4:17;—7:17;—11:16;—16:1; 2 Thess. 2:15;—3:6, 7.

Yet that the method is not that of a rigid imitation of the externalities of action is indicated by Paul's insistence on the spirit as opposed to the letter, by his becoming "all things to all men," and by the limitations indicated in Postulate 2. The historic argument in brief is of the nature of the argument for the law of gravitation; namely: in a wide induction of cases of which slavery may be considered a test-case, guidance has invariably been found in New Testament precedent (in its precedent of spirit if not of form) leading to their permanent and right settlement. This constantly strengthening inductive argument joined to the *a priori* argument and to the Scriptural evidence adduced, lead to the assumption that no case will arise for which the New Testament record will not to a proper test yield a determining precedent.

*Postulate 2. Sufficient limitation upon New Testament example may be derived from the New Testament itself.*

The limitations temporal, local, ethnic, personal, and spiritual indicated above are clearly discernible by careful study of the New Testament record. The earlier action is limited by the later action; the single action by the consensus of action; action under abnormal conditions by that of more normal conditions, e. g. We are enabled by a study of the consensus of action in the New Testament to see that baptism and the Lord's Supper are rites whose preservation is of permanent importance while the act of feet-washing is but a passing illustration of a permanent principle; and similarly that the communism of the early church was a temporary element while the unemphasized observance of the first day of the week indicates a permanent element in the Christian economy.

*Postulate 3. Fidelity to New Testament principle may involve departure from formal New Testament precedent.*

Since there is in New Testament action a precedent of spirit as well as of form, the latter yields where necessary to the former. There are instances

a. Where the action has *no direct continuative force*. E. g.

All of the merely temporal, local, ethnic, and personal elements of New Testament action.

b. There are other instances where the precedential force of an action *calls for varying action from time to time*.

E. g. a) Christ washing his disciples' feet calls for whatever action may at any time best express humble and courteous ministry to the brethren.

b) The injunction to the kiss of salutation calls for whatever action under varying circumstances may best express cordial Christian greeting.

c. There are instances where the precedential force of an action *urges to contrary action*.

E. g. Christ came eating and drinking (wine.) The principle actuating our Saviour was doubtless his sympathy for common humanity in opposition to Pharisaism and asceticism. But that principle of human sympathy (love) would alike by Christ's and by Paul's rule lead to abstinence from wine if its use were likely to cause "the weak brother," the "little one," to stumble.

*Postulate 4. Unthinking imitation lies in the lowest plane of action.*

Imitation is a simian characteristic, useful chiefly in the training of the lower animals, of the youngest children, of the lowest races, and of the feeble-minded. The Mosaic economy was preceptive rather than imitative, and Christianity moves upon the high plane of principle, the precept and precedent of Scripture being chiefly illustrative of principles which have an infinite variety in application.

Accordingly we arrive at the significant result:

*Postulate 5. The test of a precedent is its consonance with some explicit Scripture principle or the possibility of its synthesis with other precedential action into a principle which may be shown to be contained implicitly in Scripture.*

An action then to have the force of a permanent example must be shown to spring from permanent principle, this principle being either one explicitly stated in Scripture or one which by comparison of the given action with other instances of Scriptural action may be fairly inferred from Scripture. Our general method, it will be seen, is that of *testing for a principle* as in chemical research one tests for an

acid or an alkali. This method moreover works in two directions: (a) it tests incidents of New Testament action\* in order to determine what precedential force if any they possess; and (b) it tests practical modern question† in order to determine what authority or disapproval is given them by New Testament precedent.

In testing New Testament action for its precedential force the inquiry may proceed along the following lines;

- 1) What are the elements of action involved?
- 2) What limitations; temporal, local, ethnic, personal, or spiritual, affect them?
- 3) What elements of action are permanent, what occasional, what wholly incidental?
- 4) What principles explicit or implicit, if any, are involved?

In testing a disputed modern practice for its Scriptural authority, the inquiry may proceed along similar but not wholly co-incident lines, as follows:

- 1) What are the elements of action involved?
- 2) Does Scripture contain explicit allusion to the practice, and if so of what sort?
- 3) Is the apparent force of New Testament precedent in the case modified by the limitations named above, or over-ruled by some New Testament principle?
- 4) If not explicitly named in Scripture is there other action involving its essential elements?
- 5) What principles explicit‡ or implicit§ if any are involved?

It does not enter into the scope of these articles to make application of these principles. The writer has however made frequent test of the method and in view of a contemplated continuation of the subject hereafter, criticism or query upon these articles would be gratefully welcomed.

\* E. g. Christ's cleansing of the Temple; Christ's mingling with Publicans and Sinners? The limitation of the earliest Christian ministry to Israel alone.

† E. g. The Temperance question; the Amusement question; the "Labor Problem."

‡ E. g. Explicit principles: Salvation through faith; Self-denial for others' good; Religion tested by its fruits; Christians responsible for the world's evangelization; etc.

§ E. g. Implicit principles; The limitation of individual by associated Christianity; the specific effect of raising an issue (1 Cor. 10:28); the principle of accommodation; etc.